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George

3RD ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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MR ALBERT L GOLDBLATT
11033 WESTMERE CIR
DALLAS TX 75230-3551
10 RK13 5020
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CONSPIRACY
ISSUE



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conspire: from *L. conspirare*, to breathe together, agree, conspire; to join in a secret agreement to do an unlawful or wrongful act or to use such means to accomplish a lawful end.

Tell me, do you not conspire on a regular basis? I think if you're honest, you'd agree a conspiracy is a bit like the bugs chomping in the grass in your backyard—it's everywhere, a natural outgrowth of human behavior, wherever and whenever people congregate to form societies. Bringing people into such potential friction requires enormous trust. Trust is thus enemy to conspiracy and often its first victim, probably because trust can live without conspiracy, but conspiracy cannot live without trust.

How often do we consciously or unconsciously subvert a colleague's ambitions at work in order to further our own personal ambitions? Sometimes we do so with the aid of another colleague in the office—the proverbial third party. True, blocking someone else's chances at advancing their career is not illegal, but it is answerable on a higher spiritual plane.

How often in airports at a crowded bank of phones do we overhear people's preoccupation with plotting and secrecy—"You didn't hear this from me," "I'm worried about this getting out," "This is off the record, but they actually did..." "This stays between us," or "If they find out, we're dead!" All this "us-versus-them" public hugger-mugger is really a symptom of industrial sabotage, which I do believe goes on all the time in our competitive and rumor-ridden soci-

ety. In fact, I would say every global businessman I've recently met seems quite willing to use most, if not any, means to an end. What really did that great co-conspirator Richard Nixon do at Watergate that was so different from how we truly believe the private sector works? We do, however, draw the line and disallow that behavior in the public sector; Bill Clinton seems, after his own fashion, to be discovering this.

The degree of cruelty in children without spiritual values is frightening to me. School was often like *Lord of the Flies*. I'm sure many of us encountered a certain type of girl who, because Johnny wouldn't take her to the prom, would be damned sure that her friend Donna wasn't going to take him either—and thus would spread the most awful stories about poor little Johnny "who is such a jerk." Or the behavior of boys and girls in any sixth-grade class or summer camp, ganging up on the outside boy or girl, who might fight back by trying to make friends with a third party to counter the first conspiracy. In these ways, gangs and cliques, reeking of conspiracy, are formed early in our emotional development.

In history, to which I fled to avoid some of these schoolyard cruelties, I thought I could find some solace in a grander, less petty imagination. Ironically, not so. Instead, I found history, when kings were kings and politics was always a division of power, to be fraught with conspiracy.

In the U.S., we pride ourselves on being a country where political change occurs without violence—through a peaceful democratic



CULVER PICTURES

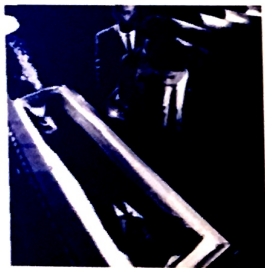
TRUST IS THE ENEMY

Above: Napoleon Bonaparte's death mask
Opposite page: Oliver Stone, photographed at his office in Santa Monica, California, in August 1998.

Oliver Stone delves into history's most intriguing conspiracy theories and our own dark natures. How can we doubt the possibility of sinister plots when we hatch them every day? He will make a believer out of you.

OUR COUNTERFEIT HISTORY





CONSPIRACY DOESN'T SLEEP

From top: The last hours of Napoleon at St. Helena; a soldier setting fire to a thatched hut in 1967, during the Vietnam War; mourners pay their respects at the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968.

process. People, rather than the shadowy motives of the state, guide the future. The deaths of our leaders are tragic acts of faith, accidents, the work of unbalanced madmen who, once destroyed, can no longer harm us. In such a view, tragedy becomes a random event, an act of God that could not have been prevented. Only in empires long since turned to dust do honorable men actually conspire to kill or depose for the cold motive of power. Those who would suggest that it happens here, as it does in European or Asiatic history, are frowned upon and painted as eccentric by our society's leaders and its media. Yet, an examination of history reveals a persistent thread of convenient tragedy linked to the turning points of the fates of nations. And, in the smoke of the funeral pyre, not all the faces are crying.

Having recently written a screenplay about Alexander the Great, I was a little intrigued to discover that his famous father, Philip II, had been assassinated under mysterious circumstances. Alexander, not far from his side that day, was immediately suspect, as was his abused mother, Olympias, and her political party. The assassin himself was quickly slain, and the murder, to this day, remains an enigma. What did Alexander know? Was the motive truly based on a homosexual feud?

In Alexander's own untimely death at age 33, we have again strong evidence of a conspiracy of family clans. They may have come together to terminate a young ruler who had no pure Macedonian heirs but was dangerous in his desire to radically globalize the known world by, among other things, intermixing Macedonian and Oriental blood. Did he die of fever or from poisoned wine? I choose to believe the latter.

I think of poor Julius Caesar, stabbed a supposed 44 times by friends who became co-conspirators. I think of Archbishop Thomas Becket (*The Man for All Seasons*) and his age-old feud with King Henry II delimiting the power of the state over religion—we find perhaps the first use of plausible deniability in that disarming quote attributed to Henry: "Who would rid me of this man?"

I think of the happy Pope John Paul I, dying of a supposed heart attack in his sleep after 33 days of papal rule in 1978. From day one, rumors of murder have persisted. Was this innocent pope sniffing out the massive fraud perpetrated in the name of God by the Vatican Bank, or was he aware of its ties to the shadowy neo-fascist undergrounds in Europe and Latin America?

Could the Russians handle a movie that implied Stalin had poisoned Lenin before Lenin could change his mind about who was going to

run the place? The French have long insisted that Napoleon was poisoned by arsenic; DNA revelations of his hair point to this. Was the dastardly deed done by the English—or was it a traitor in Napoleon's own circle? Most recently, the handprints of Pol Pot's enemies were seen everywhere in his death and rapid cremation.

I think also of the doomed reformer Luis Donaldo Colosio, shot down campaigning for the presidency in the turbulent Mexico of 1994. Once again, the lone-gunner theory does not hold up to serious investigation. Was Colosio the target of drug lords (the equivalent of our Mafia in the assassination of President Kennedy), or was he the victim of bitter political rivalries within his own PRI party (akin to our own intelligence services murdering our president)? The powerful Tijuana police chief—who had always contested the official story and was getting closer to a break in the case—was himself brutally murdered in an ambush that many believe was staged by drug dealers (another parallel to Jack Ruby?). The Mexican government's investigation, for those who follow these things, has resembled the Warren Commission in its bumbling dishonesty cloaked in establishment prestige.

In our country, we find the fascinating coup d'état planned against President Franklin Roosevelt in 1934 to have almost disappeared from the history books. You don't have to wonder why when you understand the power of the conspirators—J.P. Morgan, Jr., Bernard Baruch, and Thomas Lamont, with the limited participation of General Douglas MacArthur—or the amazing ability of the media, which were then as now basically controlled by the powerful of this country, to vaporize the incident into the black hole of ridicule. Henry Luce's magazines trivialized the various testimonies at the time, and the incident was buried largely because Roosevelt himself was weathering a major storm and feared a revolution if these events were revealed. Thank God for the memory of the few men still around who do not so easily forget a coup d'état, and thank God for the little-read Dickstein-McCormack congressional hearings into the affair.

The awkwardness of conspiracy theories still prevails in American politics, as I think we see in the murder of President Kennedy and the media's inability to sustain an ambiguous and unclosed investigation. It is reasonably clear from historical study that politics is power and people do kill one another if they want to acquire that power or, equally important, stop it. Kennedy, in 1963, like Alexander long before him, was increasingly calling for radical change on several fronts—the USSR, Cuba, Vietnam. Looming ahead with his cer-

tain victory in 1964 was the specter of a Kennedy dynasty well into the 1970s. If nothing else, a motive for murder is evident.

In present-day life, it is ironic that the media, like the Greek Furies of old, have inherited the malevolent capacity to drive any one of us mad. In essence, with the echoing power of modern communications, they have replaced the assassin's bullet as the means of political destruction. Their capacity for malice has been phenomenally effective in ending the presumptions of thousands of outspoken iconoclasts by simplifying and marginalizing them—e.g., Ross Perot, Jane Fonda, Dick Gregory, Jerry Brown, Louis Farrakhan, Abbie Hoffman, Gary Hart, the Berrigans, Pierre Salinger—although they've had no success yet with foreign tough guys Saddam Hussein and Fidel Castro.

There is devastating irony to the fact that my own generation grew up under the biggest conspiracy theory of them all—the “Mother of all conspiracies.” Yet few recognized it, because it was so ingrained in our schoolroom consciousness. (And they blame us for being paranoid?) My father and his generation, enslaved by Orwellian fear, thoroughly convinced us that there was a monolithic communist conspiracy at work, involving all of Russia, China, and Eastern Europe—two-thirds of the world map. Not only were they going to invade America militarily, but they had already started the moral and spiritual destruction of our values in our schools, our arts, and our State Department as well! No one, by the way, has ever apologized to our generation for the brazen dishonesty of this belief system and the enormous damage it has caused our generation.

Thus, I continually find it so condescending that Richard Hofstadter, with his 1963 essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, is trotted out each time by the self-righteous media to attack those who investigate conspiracy in our culture. It's condescending simply because we've had so many provable conspiracies in the U.S.: from the first gathering of conspirators against the Stamp Act, kicking off our own first and last Revolutionary War, right up to Watergate and the Iran-contra conspiracies, the latter of whose surface I believe was barely scratched because it had such significant implications against our military-industrial-communications empire.

Our reporters, time and again, are backing off stories because of their editors, who seem to naturally skew more conservative with their accretion of power. The editors' moneyed bosses, also conservative of nature, are telling them to back off—not in so many ways as “Do not undertake this story.” No, but in contexts

such as “Who cares? Boring! No ratings. Been there before—done that,” or “If you go there, the shit will hit the fan—which basically will not help your career at this organization”—in other words, what may be called the Maureen Dowd-better-to-believe-in-nothing-therefore-do-nothing school of journalism. All of this is unspoken, of course. Who wants to be a shit stirrer in our present consensual society? We all want to join, we all want to be part of something, to be loved and approved of. No one honestly sets out to rock the boat except the occasional intellectual loner or artist. Believe me when I say most of us kind of stumble into it—and it is at that point you must decide, “Do I back off, or do I defend what I have done?”

All this is not to deny, by the way, the role of accident and individual choice in history. Kings do fall off horses and break their necks. Individual men and women sometimes single-handedly change the course of their nation's fate. Floods, storms, bad harvests, and the global greenhouse are causations as well. Accident, individual choice, and conspiracy have lived comfortably side by side for centuries, but in the simplistic anti-conspiracy ranting of the media, there seems to be this inability to allow for more than one cause and one effect. History is ambiguous. Cause and effect are also ambiguous.

Nations, I think, plunge further into the abyss by silencing the voices that cry for independent inquiry at a time of crisis. Where is the immediate dissent when politicians scream for tougher civil and criminal laws at the first sign of some new terrorist outrage or criminal horror? Where is the dissent against the drug sentencing of the last ten years? Or the six to eight mini-wars we've fought since Vietnam—in the name of what? Revenge, anger, getting ratings, getting votes? It always seems that the loudest voices win these days—the bully's way. Yet the lessons of history repeatedly point out the virtue of independent thinking. The need to question. Disbelieve. Defy.

Allow then, in our million-dollar-a-TV-minute culture, a little space and time for the contrarian, and allow that paranoia in moderation, like red wine, is healthy precisely because conspiracy does not sleep. Our failure of perception is the reason we rarely see it. Why? “Treason doth never prosper,” an English poet once wrote. “What's the reason? For if it prosper, none dare call it treason.”

Now back to those bugs in the backyard. ☐

PARANOIA IS HEALTHY

Below: The assassination of Julius Caesar by Brutus and Cassius on the Ides of March; the Lorraine Motel, in Memphis, from the view of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassin.

